

Transnational and Homogamous Couples in Italy: Gender Heterogeneities and Mate Selection Patterns

Coppie transnazionali ed omogame in Italia: eterogeneità di genere e modelli di selezione del partner

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Abstract The transnational couples growth notably in Italy during the recent past. The paper aims at analysing the patterns of mate selection of such unions in comparison with homogamous ones. Using the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey data, we analyse the elements of gender heterogeneity between the partners in order to verify if and to what extent the exchange theory fit to the Italian context. We consider in particular age and occupational differences. According to the *exchange theory*, a type of “bargaining” occurs in couple formation between foreign and Italian partners; however different aspects emerge in the Italian context with respect to those of the “classical” hypotheses.

Riassunto Le coppie con un partner straniero sono notevolmente aumentate in Italia, rendendo interessante l’analisi delle modalità di formazione di tali unioni, comparandole con quelle omogame. Utilizzando i dati provenienti dall’Indagine campionaria sulle nascite e sulle madri del 2012, si considerano alcune caratteristiche dei partner, ossia le differenze nell’età e nei livelli occupazionali, al fine di verificare se e in che misura la *exchange theory* si adatti al contesto italiano. Conformemente a tale teoria, una sorta di “contrattazione” si verifica nella formazione della coppia tra partner italiano e partner straniero; tuttavia si evidenziano anche elementi peculiari rispetto alle ipotesi “classiche”.

Key words: transnational couples, mate selection, gender heterogeneity, Italy

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1 Introduction

The increase and the peculiarities of transnational couples has attracted the attention of researchers both in the “old” destination countries of migrant flows like USA, Canada and Australia (Pagnini and Morgan, 1990; Kalbach, 2002; Rosenfeld, 2002) and, more recently, in the “new” European and Asian host countries (Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2006; Kim, 2012). Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, various theoretical approaches have been developed: exchange, assimilation, social stratification and segmented assimilation theories (for a review, see Dribe and Lundt, 2008). The most influential of these is the exchange theory, that referred to interracial marriage between blacks and whites in the United States (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941). Many authors have recently reinterpreted and supported this theory, completely or partially with some adjustments, in the current contexts of immigration countries. In short, they argue that the immigrant who marries a member of the host community “barters” a high socio-economic status with the high “ethnic” status of the autochthonous partner (Kalmijn, 1998; Furtado, 2006; Qian and Lichter, 2007).

In Italy, scholars conducted at the beginning of XX century above all analyses on the field of homogamy (Gini, 1915); since the end of the 1970s, the increase of immigration flows produced a growth interest on transnational unions. They reveal the presence of different combinations of nationalities, with foreign partners from countries and cultures of even distant contexts (Barbagli, 1984; Maffioli and Paterno, 2008; Tognetti Bordogna, 1996; Maffioli et al. 2012).

A recent article (Maffioli et al. 2014), utilizing individual data from the 2005 Births Sample Survey, highlighted that the greater “bargaining power” in terms of socio-economic status, exercised by the Italian partner compared to the foreigner, is mostly “counterbalanced” by qualities which the latter offers, such as a younger age and a higher educational level.

Bearing in mind the relevant literature and using the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey, we aim to analyse the patterns of mate selection of transnational unions in Italy, in a comparative perspective with all-Italian and all-foreigner homogamous couples. Considering some characteristics of the unions (differences in age and occupational status between partners) and examining the elements of gender heterogeneity, we verify if and to what extent the exchange theory fit the recent assortative mating in the Italian context.

2 Transnational couples in Italy: dynamics and characteristics

Official data produced by the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Istat) recorded the nationality of the respondents in the last three Population Censuses (1991, 2001, and 2011). The first information highlighted by available Census data (tab. 1) is the notable growth of transnational couples, which passed from 65.1 thousand in 1991 to 320.2 thousand in 2011. The union formed by an Italian man and a foreign woman

are preponderant compared to those formed by an Italian women and a foreign man (respectively 82.0% and 18.0% in 2011). Regarding the countries of citizenship, the unions with a partner from European and Northern American countries, although most numerous, are slightly declining (from 66.6% in 1991 to 64.8% in 2011). In particular, between 2001 and 2011, among transnational couples with foreign women, the quota of European Union and Northern American countries increased, while the proportion of East European countries decreased; this is just a formal change, due to the admission of 12 countries in the European Union which occurred during the decade, with the consequent “shift” in their classification. The preference of Italian men for East European women (particularly Romanian, Polish, Ukrainian and Albanian) and for the South and Central Americans (mainly Brazilian) remains unchanged. The highest values of couples in which the foreign partner is the man correspond to some African nationalities (particularly Moroccan and Tunisian).

Table 1: Transnational couples by typology ^(a) and areas of citizenship of the partners, 1991, 2001, and 2011 censuses. Percentage values and number of couples

<i>Citizenship of the foreign partner</i>	<i>1991</i>			<i>2001</i>			<i>2011</i>		
	<i>FW/IM</i>	<i>IW/FM</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>FW/IM</i>	<i>IW/FM</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>FW/IM</i>	<i>IW/FM</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Europe and North. America</i>	47.1	19.5	66.6	51.1	14.1	65.2	55.1	9.7	64.8
of which:									
E.U. and North America	36.9	15.4	52.4	29.3	11.0	40.4	37.4	7.1	44.6
Eastern Europe	10.2	4.1	14.3	21.7	3.1	24.8	17.7	2.6	20.2
<i>Other continents</i>	21.1	12.3	33.4	25.0	9.8	34.8	26.9	8.3	35.2
of which:									
Northern Africa	3.0	4.8	7.8	2.8	4.5	7.3	5.2	3.6	8.8
Other Africa	2.1	1.2	3.3	2.7	0.9	3.6	2.7	1.2	3.9
Asia and Oceania	5.3	3.5	8.8	4.0	1.5	5.5	5.6	1.1	6.6
Central and Southern America	10.7	2.9	13.6	15.6	2.8	18.4	13.5	2.4	15.8
Total	68.2	31.8	100.0	76.1	23.9	100.0	82.0	18.0	100.0
N. of couples (in thousands)	44.4	20.7	65.1	151.2	47.5	198.7	262.6	57.6	320.2

Note: (a) the following acronyms describe the couple typology: IW/FM for Italian woman-foreign man; FW/IM for foreign woman-Italian man.

Source: for 1991 and 2001 data, Maffioli and Paterno, 2008; for 2011 data, Istat, 2014.

The gender heterogeneity, represented by a greater tendency to exogamy of Italian men than women and by a differentiated systems of “geographical” preferences of the two genders, is determined by a complex set of factors; among these we quote the composition by sex and marital status of migration flows to Italy, in which an increasing female participation was observed (Impicciatore and Strozza, 2015), the different strategies of integration of immigrants by gender, the characteristics of the “union market”, and the different exogamous/homogamous tendencies of the foreign communities (Rossi and Strozza, 2007). In particular, should be recalled that Islamic law prohibits heterogamous marriage to Muslim women. On the other hand, the low exogamy of autochthonous women may depend on the fact that immigrant men less often hold the characteristics that configure them as “candidates” for unions, since a satisfactory socio-economic situation is usually a more significant condition for men than it is for women (Saraceno, 2007).

3 Data and methods

The data used come from the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey, that was conducted by Istat at a national level. The survey concerned 17,603 mothers whose children were born in the period July 2009-June 2010 (Istat, 2015). Although our sample concerns only parental couples that recently had a child, excluding those who have previously completed family formation, those who cannot or do not have children, and those who form a couple at an advanced age, interesting elements emerge from comparisons with the corresponding group of homogamous parental couples (both Italians and foreigners), that throw light on the functioning of the “union market” in Italy. Moreover, the data used have the advantage that they do not consider marriages “of convenience”, whose purpose is to enable the immigrant spouse to obtain Italian citizenship. Since the type of couple is defined with reference to the nationality of the parents of the child, the unions whose children were not recognized by the father are excluded from the analysis. We decided to use the criterion of citizenship at birth, instead of that of country of birth, because the latter can produce an over-estimation of the foreigners, due to the high number of Italians born abroad when Italy was a sending country of migratory flows.

Unfortunately, the available data do not allow us to build a classification of foreign partners by single citizenship, due to the absence of this information for the men, while for the women the only available data refers to the macro-area of origin. In our analysis, we highlight the role of gender, distinguishing according to the sex of the foreign partner.

As our sample includes only parental couples, we have not applied the conventional and most used approach in the multivariate analyses. In particular, we do not analyse the determinants of an individual to form a transnational union. Conversely, we apply multinomial and logistic regressions to verify whether the combinations of partners’ characteristics are really to be attributed to the transnational/homogamous couples’ typology, controlling the influence of spurious factors.

4 Transnational and homogamous couples: a comparative analysis

The observed parental couples are classified by citizenship of the partners as follows (tab. 2): 80.8 % by both Italians (IW/IM), 5.7% by a foreign woman and an Italian man (FW/IM), 1.2% by an Italian woman and a foreign man (IW/FM), and 12.3% by both foreigners (FW/FM). Among the latter group, the only exploitable information shows a very high homogamy: in 75.8% of the weddings celebrated in 2009-2010, both spouses had the same nationality, especially for whose partners coming from Asia and Africa (see <http://demo.istat.it/altridati/IscrittiNascita/>).

As we consider the citizenship at birth, it emerges that, among women, 28.5% acquired Italian citizenship afterwards, and 18.6% of them through marriage; among

men, these values are respectively 46.4% and only 8.5%. If we consider the acquisition of citizenship as a proxy of the achievement of a high level of integration, this data suggest that, among men, marriage can be seen as a result of integration while, among women, integration can be subsequent to marriage.

Observing the variables available only for the female partner, regarding educational levels we note that the percentage of women in FW/IM unions with secondary and university degrees (70.1%) is higher than in other types of couples. This result is consistent with previous researches stressing that the elevated level of education of immigrants, although it does not automatically involve an improvement in socio-economic status, can often be connected with cultural and/or linguistic preparation, open-mindedness and social contacts, that can be seen as factors that favour exogamy (Kalmjin, 1998; Kalmjin and van Tubergen, 2006).

The quota of women who have had a previous marital experience is slightly higher than 7% in transnational couples and a little above 3% in homogamous unions. To our knowledge, this aspect has not been found for other countries, but has been underlined yet in a recent article on Italy (Maffioli et al., 2014).

The available information about both the partners considers firstly the presence of at least one birth coming from previous couple experiences and shows that the quota of women who were mothers before the current union reaches 10.0% in FW/IM couples and 5.1% in IW/FM unions, while it remains lower than 3% in homogamous pairings. This condition is less widespread among men, where it reaches the highest values in FW/IM (1.7%) and in FW/FM (1.6%) unions. Such results suggest that the women who previously lived such an experience often benefit from the exogamous “union market”, where a foreign partner can embody a new “opportunity”. Data about partners’ relationship at beginning of pregnancy highlight that informal unions are much more spread among FW/IM and IW/FM unions (about 30%) than in homogamous Italian (14.8%) and foreign ones (8.5%). Therefore, also the transnational pairings observed so far confirm, as emerged from previous studies, that they are “particularly hesitant to transform an informal relationship into a legally recognized one, because of communication and decisional difficulties originating in their different cultural backgrounds, or by unfriendly attitudes of their families and/or social environment” (Maffioli et al. 2014, p. 164).

Estimating the mean ages of the women and of the men, in a general context in which the former are on average younger than the latter, the obtained values are very dissimilar by type of couples. In fact, the relative youth of the women is the lowest for the IW/FM unions (-2.1 years), and the highest for the FW/IM ones (-8.9 years). These characteristics appear to be rather constant in time (Maffioli and Paterno, 2008; Maffioli et al., 2012). Classifying the unions by the type of differences in the age of both partners, it is evident, on one hand, that in FW/IM unions, men are older than women in a greater quota of cases (85.6%) than the other typologies of pairings (with a value of only 50.3% for IW/FM unions); on the other hand, women are older than their partners among IW/FM couples in 23.3% of cases, against values under 9% in the other types of unions.

The conditions of both partners in the labour market refer to current situation, that we used as a proxy of the unobserved one at the time of union.

Table 2: Demographic and socio-economic characteristics and status differences between partners, by couple type (percentage and mean values)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>IW/IM</i>	<i>FW/IM</i>	<i>IW/FM</i>	<i>FW/FM</i>
<i>Woman's level of education (%)</i>				
None or primary school	36.8	28.9	40.3	37.2
Secondary school	45.4	51.1	40.4	42.8
University	17.8	20.0	19.3	20.0
<i>Woman's previous marital experience (%)</i>				
Yes	3.6	7.1	7.3	3.9
No	96.4	92.9	92.7	96.1
<i>Partners' pre-union births (at least one) (%)</i>				
No births	96.9	88.3	94.7	96.9
Woman's births	2.8	10.0	5.1	1.5
Man's birth	0.3	1.7	0.2	1.6
Both partners' births	3.1	11.7	5.3	3.1
<i>Partners' relationship at beginning of pregnancy (%)</i>				
Marriage	85.2	71.0	69.9	91.5
Informal union	14.8	29.0	30.1	8.5
<i>Partners' mean age</i>				
Woman's mean age	34.1	32.1	32.3	30.9
Man's mean age	37.8	41.0	34.4	36.2
Woman's mean relative youth	-3.7	-8.9	-2.1	-5.3
<i>Age differences^(b)(%)</i>				
Woman older than man	8.6	6.4	23.3	7.9
Same age group	26.0	9.0	26.4	16.3
Man older than women	65.4	85.6	50.3	75.8
<i>Woman's working condition (%)</i>				
Not active, unemployed	11.8	16.5	18.3	20.1
Housewife	31.4	47.4	30.6	46.2
Low professional level	14.4	16.3	14.9	25.8
Medium professional level	35.4	17.0	30.5	7.2
High professional level	7.0	2.8	5.7	0.7
<i>Man's working condition (%)</i>				
Not active, unemployed	8.4	13.8	15.2	16.9
Low professional level	34.1	27.2	44.4	62.4
Medium professional level	38.8	42.0	24.1	17.1
High professional level	18.7	17.1	16.4	3.6
<i>Occupational differences^(c)(%)</i>				
Woman Higher	14.3	10.2	21.0	16.0
Same level	39.9	44.4	31.0	45.5
Woman Lower	45.8	45.4	48.0	38.5
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>	<i>100,0</i>	<i>100,0</i>	<i>100,0</i>
Row percentage of cases by couple type (weighted data)	80.8	5.7	1.2	12.3

Notes: (a) since the answers of the interviewed on age union contained too many missing, we had to use the information on age at the interview; this disadvantage obviously does not affect the calculation of the mean age differences; (b) man's age minus woman's age; (c) the working condition gap was constructed assigning a value to each activity - ordered according to increasing prestige levels as follows: unqualified worker (labourer, worker from home, apprentice or domestic worker); cooperative member or worker; employee or shopkeeper; professional or white collar; manager or entrepreneur - and then subtracting the woman's level from the man's level.

Source: our elaboration of the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey.

The quota of housewives is much more widespread among foreign women in transnational (47.4%) and homogamous (46.2%) pairings than among Italian women (around 30%). Moreover, foreign women are disadvantaged compared to autochthonous ones also considering the occupational levels, that is medium or high in a lower proportion for the former; this is particularly evident among FW/FM unions. The same disadvantaged positions emerge observing the occupational level of men: compared to the natives, the foreigners are more often employed in low qualified work, and have higher unemployment levels.

When both spouses are employed, we observe in all typologies of couples the spread of the unions in which the man performs more qualified activities than the woman. Observing the more rare cases of women performing “better” professional activities than men, the highest percentage is reached within IW/FM unions (21.0%), while the lowest occurs within FW/IM couples (10.2%). These results, that are undoubtedly related to the worse general conditions of immigrants in the Italian labour market (Paterno et al., 2012; Strozza et al., 2009), make it evident that the foreign partner, whether man or woman, in many cases takes advantage from the higher social and professional position of his/her autochthonous counterpart.

This outcome allows us to hypothesize that, in many cases, a younger age may be a desired characteristic that the foreign partners offer, “exchanging” it with appreciated characteristics of the native, such as a better condition in the labour market and, presumably, his/her “ethnic status”. We do not have information about the latter, but previous research highlighted that it can be represented by a plurality of aspects. Among them are an high social prestige, and/or the membership of the autochthonous group, that commonly guarantees the accessibility of social networks.

5 At the roots of the differences

Descriptive analyses show specific partners’ characteristics and mate selection patterns within transnational couples, but do not consider the reciprocal influences or distinguish between the various aspects separately examined. Therefore, we applied regression models to establish the independence and the strength of these relationships (tab. 3). The choice of the issues to examine by multivariate analysis was influenced by the quoted theoretical hypotheses and by the availability of data.

Firstly, we considered the age of the two partners and applied a multinomial regression model taking as reference the couples in which the women is younger than man, versus the two following categories: coetaneous partners, and women older than men. The control variables, in addition to the typology of couple and to the partners’ relationship (marriage vs. informal union), refers to the woman (civil status at union, educational and occupational level) and to the man (occupational level).

The results obtained fully confirm the relationships which emerged from descriptive analysis. Compared with women in IW/IM unions, the foreign partners of Italian men have a lower probability of being coetaneous or older than their counterpart. The opposite occurs in the case of Italian women joined to foreign men,

that are almost three times more likely to be older than their partners. Women in FW/FM pairings have a lower probability of being coetaneous with their consort and a higher risk of being older than him.

Table 3: Determinants of partners' differences in previous birth, age and occupation ^(a)

Variables	Age difference ref.: woman younger than man (multinomial model)		Housewives vs. active women (logistic model)		Occupational difference ref.: woman lower than man (multinomial model)	
	Same age Woman older				Same level Woman higher	
	exp(β)	Sig.	exp(β)	Sig.	exp(β)	Sig.
<i>Citizenship of partners (ref.: both Italians)</i>						
FW/IM	0.355 ***		0.639 ***		3.914 ***	1.029
IW/FM	1.110		2.615 ***		0.854	0.882
FW/FM	0.745 ***		1.178 *		1.678 ***	1.404 ***
<i>Type of union (ref.: marital)</i>						
Informal	0.957		1.621 ***		0.399 ***	0.944
<i>Woman age (ref.: <24)</i>						
25-29					0.783 ***	1.036
30-34					0.456 ***	1.234 *
35-39					0.375 ***	1.226
40+					0.363 ***	1.289 **
<i>Woman's educational level (ref.: low)</i>						
Middle	1.253 ***		1.145 *		0.378 ***	0.691 ***
High	1.659 ***		1.364 ***		0.116 ***	0.605 ***
<i>Woman's occupational level (ref.: low)^(c)</i>						
Not employed	0.880 **		0.676 ***			
Middle	1.070		0.830 **			
High	1.001		0.916			
<i>Woman's civil status at union (ref.: unmarried)</i>						
Divorced or widow	1.122		3.875 ***		0.648 ***	1.161
<i>Man's age (ref.: <24)</i>						
25-29					0.921	1.152
30-34					0.886	0.979
35-39					0.981	0.917
40+					1.155	0.831
<i>Man's occupational level (ref.: low)</i>						
Not employed	0.876 *		0.935		1.023	
Middle	1.048		1.008		0.863 ***	
High	1.002		0.918		0.887 **	
Constant term	0.315 ***		0.118 ***		2.931 ***	1.102 ***
						0.586 ***

Notes: (a) variables that in exploratory analyses proved to be not statistically significant were excluded from the models; (b) we build a logistic model, non distinguishing the births by the gender of their parents due to the low number of father having previous births; (c) we joined the not employed women to the housewives because if we had divided these two categories, the variable would have lost significance, although maintaining the same direction with respect to the dependent ones.

Source: our elaboration of the 2012 Births and Mothers Sample Survey.

With reference to other aspects, a greater risk of relative older age of the woman is related with informal unions, with the latter's having experience of previous unions and high level of education. A negative link is showed between being unemployed or employed in low level activities and the probability of the woman being older than her partner.

As we have already noted, an interesting aspect that differentiate foreign women from Italian women relates to their occupational condition, and particularly to their very high tendency not to perform activities outside the home. With this objective, excluding the persons who were unemployed or inactive for other reasons, a logistic model was developed, which distinguishes housewives from working women (considered as reference). The variables included in the model are the same as those used for the previous analyses, clearly excluding the woman's occupational level and including the age of both members of the unions. Performed elaborations show that the foreign women in exogamous unions have almost four times the risk of not performing professional activities than those in IW/IM unions and that a similar relationship, but with lesser strength, occurs for the women in FW/FM unions. All the other characteristics are negatively related to the probability of being a housewife. In particular, the prolonging of studies is not recognized in the labour market, possibly because of the difficulties experienced by many foreigners, and especially women, in finding work suitable for the studies they have completed (Paterno et al., 2012). Moreover, the risk of being a housewife is reasonably reduced for the women that are in informal unions, compared to those that are married.

Lastly, we considered exclusively the unions in which both partners are employed. This group was analysed by applying a multinomial model that considers the following three situations concerning occupational levels: lower for the woman than the man (reference category), same for both partners, and higher for the woman than the man. Control variables are the same as in the previous model, with the obvious exclusion of the partners' occupational levels. In comparison with IW/IM couples, foreign women in transnational unions risk to be relatively disadvantaged in their professional position with respect to their partners. On the contrary, women in IW/FM and FW/FM unions have greater probability of occupying professions of higher level than their counterpart. If this result is read together with the outcomes of the model commented above, it is confirmed that the foreign women experience greater difficulty in finding an adequate position on the Italian labour market. Other results indicate that the characteristics negatively related to the risk for the female partner to perform a lower level employment than the male are to be highly educated and to be older than 40, while an opposite effect is exercised if the woman has had previous marital experience.

6 Conclusion

The results which emerged from descriptive and multivariate regression analysis, though based on specific elements, highlight the presence of distinctive mate

selection patterns of transnational couples, compared to homogamous ones. In fact, we can suppose that a type of “bargaining” occurs between foreign and Italian partners: the former “offers” his/her relative youth (and presumably his/her high level of education, Maffioli et al., 2014), in exchange not only for the access to the social “ethnic status” of the autochthonous partner, but also for economic security due to the better occupational level of the latter. Therefore, we can affirm, confirming the results which emerged from a recent article (Maffioli et al., 2014), that a “variant” of the exchange theory can fit the Italian case. The exchange does indeed occur, but it involves different aspects with respect to those which emerged from “classical” hypotheses. Mainly due to the disadvantage suffered by immigrants in the Italian labor market, the characteristics that compensate the high occupational and “ethnic status” of the autochthonous are other than the economic ones.

In this context, the female partners seem to take advantage of an exogamous “union market”, especially in the cases in which they have had previous affective relationships and if they are already mothers at the time of current union.

In conclusion, who “gains” and who “loses” in the union market? The question can be observed in terms of heterogeneity/homogeneity between partners, that contributes to determine the distribution of “power” in the couple. The particular heterogeneity of transnational couples (and especially in FW/IM pairings) can imply, in some cases, also a state of inferiority of the foreign partner. At the same time, there is a risk that the latter have adapted to solutions of convenience.

Anyway, the presence of an “exchange” does not exclude both a mate choice based on attraction and affinity, and that Italian partner plays a mediating role between the foreign one and the social context, promoting a harmonization process that could represent a way to multiculturalism.

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